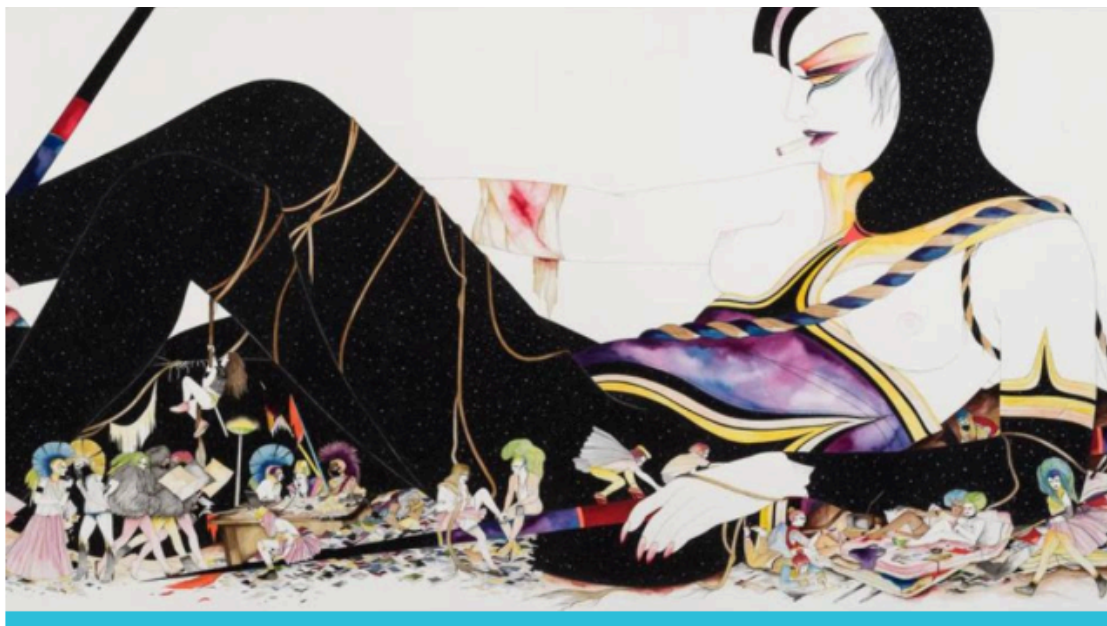


ART

When Riot Grrrls Meet Goddess Warriors



by Gabby Bess OCT 8, 2015 12:25 PM



Back from Berlin, artist Jen Ray explores the differences between German feminism and American feminism through goddess warriors in her new exhibition "Deep Cuts."

Jen Ray just got back to New York from Berlin, and she's already getting ready for her first solo exhibition in the US, *Deep Cuts*. Tonight, at the newly opened [Albertz Benda gallery](#) in Chelsea, her otherworldly line-drawn paintings of warrior goddesses will be set off by a feminist reimagining of the 1969 song "American Woman," performed by Honeychild Coleman.

Both women draw inspiration from their Riot Grrrl roots; Coleman was a founding member of New York's [Sista Grrrl Riots](#). The resulting aesthetic is a celebration of femininity with a hard edge. The artist Jen Ray took a break from setting up the show to talk to Broadly about the differences between German feminism and American feminism, getting into goddesses through Sunday afternoon cartoons, and why she only draws women.

Bess, Gabby. "When Riot Grrrls Meet Goddess Warriors," *Broadly*, October 8, 2015.

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BROADLY: How's it going in the gallery?

Jen Ray: Everything is going really well. We're having the performance tomorrow at 7, and it's going to be crazy. Honeychild Coleman is going to sing my conceptual version of the song "American Woman"—it's a very punk version. I have another friend coming from Berlin—I just came from Berlin—so it's sort of this Berlin/America concept.

Why did you come back to New York?

Well, I'm not exactly back, but I've lived here before—I lived in Williamsburg. I used to work at the New Museum. So many people were leaving New York for Berlin, as you probably know. We were part of that exodus. We loved living in Berlin. New York was so expensive and the city became sort of aggressive and difficult. So we went to Berlin, and there I was able to be a full-time artist and really explore a lot of things. But at a certain point, and the exhibition really talks about this, unless you really want to go German and become a citizen, I feel that you're drawn back to the US, as an American. There's so much about my work that really is about being an American. Also, American feminism and German feminism, which I think have very different qualities. I ran a feminist group in Germany with a friend of mine, and it was very different.

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That's interesting. I was reading the press release, and they used the word "earthiness" to describe the distinction between German feminism and American feminism that you're talking about. I was wondering where that comes into your work, because your paintings seem very sci-fi, almost the opposite of earthiness.

In Germany they're very connected to the feminist 70s—earth mothers and goddesses, and the worship of these ancient deities that are female. For me, I actually include those kinds of goddesses in my work, but they're much more pop. I had a hard time being interested in something that happened so long ago. If you're looking at Venus of Willendorf, that's very much an enigma, even though she's a female figure, sure, and has these bountiful breasts. I wanted to say something about women as gods, or monsters, or queens, but do it in a way that's much more now. I'm more connected to Riot Grrrl influences than I am to 70s feminism.



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I can see the images in your work being a more updated version of a goddess. Or being this more "in your face" version of a goddess, rather than nurturing.

I do feel like they're at war. When I was kid I used to watch this show called *Isis*. It was about an archeologist who discovers this magical amulet and it turns her into Isis. She flies around helping people and lifting cars. So I'm connected to ancient goddesses through television culture—that's very American. There's such a sampling in my work—that kind of America-ness where you draw from high sources and low sources all the time.

Speaking of your Riot Grrrl influences, did you meet Honeychild Coleman in Berlin?

When you live in Berlin there are all these people who are traveling around Europe as musicians—she was one of those people. So I had heard of her and we knew some of the people in the same circles. Then I came to New York to visit, and it turned out she was a good friend of another friend of mine, and I thought it would be really interesting to work with her. I had never worked with someone who played electric guitar, which of course is not so common when it comes to women. I really liked that idea. And then I started talking to her about it, and that's how I came to create the project with her.

How did you decide on doing the arrangement of "American Woman"?

I love that song. The band that sings it—I'm not talking about the Lenny Kravitz [version], let's forget about that guy—is Canadian. But in the song they're touching on a lot of things that people think about America, both good and bad. Like how glamorous it is and how sexualized it is. They're talking about it like a woman, like a "bad" woman, if you read the lyrics. They say, "I don't need your war machine, I don't need your ghetto scene." In a way it's like a rejection of America, but as if America is also female. So I wanted to take something like that and have a woman sing it and reposition it and sort of own the song. I like to do that in my work. There's things about America that *are* bad, so it's not untrue.

But it seems kind of wild to equate that negativity with women. That war and violence that they're railing against stems from a patriarchal system.

Exactly. I don't want to say it, but it has to do with the Bible, the whore of Babylon. But I totally agree. When I listen to the song it's like, what are women doing? It's not our fault.

When did you first start painting these warrior women? It seems like your last few exhibitions have been centered around these women as recurring figures.

I've always drawn these figures, even when I was a kid. I went to art school and did all the art school things that you do. Then later I was like, what do I really like to draw? What's the passion that I have? Basically, it was working with these characters and putting them in these scenes, so I decided to go back to it, honestly. I say "honestly" because I don't have to apologize for drawing figures or being colorful. I just want to draw them and enjoy them, and show really tough women and have fun with it.

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I saw an interview you do in which you said that you only paint women in your work. I was curious if you've ever willingly drawn men?

Not really. I can never make men look quite right. Of course I can properly draw a man, but I'm not really all that interested in where men are coming from, to be honest. I don't understand what's going on inside those heads of theirs. If there's a male character in my work, it's probably a creature of some sort. There's some things that are covered with hair—that's probably a male figure. It's not a negative; they're usually, like, helpers. They're there, they're holding down some things. Other than that, I think I'm comfortable drawing women and I enjoy it.

Do think that, aesthetically, men are less pleasing to draw and look at?

[Laughs] My husband is going to be like, "What? You love men." And I do love men, because they're so different from women, but I'm just not interested in depicting them as an artist. But sometimes people think that the only women in the drawing are beautiful women or slender women, and it's actually not true if you look closely. I really love women of all sizes and shapes. Then in the performance I try to include a lot of women who are different nationalities, sizes, and ethnicities; I can really get into lots of different types of women.

I'd love to talk about your performance. It sounds so interesting. You're leading a procession of women from the High Line in Chelsea to the gallery?

I actually had to cancel that. We're having the performance in the gallery now because I thought we were going to have this terrible weather so I got a little nervous. Right now, we're gonna have this mega jam in the gallery. It's going to be the same performance, but it's not going to be on the High Line.

Do you always have a performative element along with your paintings in your shows?

I do, a lot of times, because people ask me to do it. I can take off my artist hat and be more of a director, and work directly with women. I hope that it's more of a collaboration. I listen to what the performers want to do. I don't want to become a dictator. I like to think of the performance aspect as a way to meet interesting women and work on a project with them. I see it as a different way of being an artist.

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